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ABSTRACT

This document consists of the four issues of the "Media Now" newsletter published during 1997-1998. Functioning as a link between academia and the creative community, the "Media Now" newsletter from Children Now is dedicated to keeping advertisers, advertising professionals, television writers, and producers and network executives abreast of current research on the media as it pertains to children. Each issue covers a main topic, concisely summarizing research findings and statistics on that topic and offering a "Solutions" column to help members of the media create alternative products more in line with the summarized information on beneficial and harmful effects on children. The Spring 1997 issue offers "A Report on Children's Television." The Fall 1997 issue presents "Advertising Images of Girls and Women." Spring 1998's issue features "Advertising and Children's Health" (discussing food ads, ads and body image, tobacco ads, alcohol ads, the view from the industry, smoking on the silver screen, and advertisers making a change). The Winter 1998 issue addresses "Children and Television Violence." (EV)

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ED 433 920

Current Research on Children and the Media

A Report on Children's Television

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Introducing

MediaNow

In 1996, the Children & the Media Program's annual media conference explored the role of advertisers in improving the quality of TV for children. During the gathering, advertisers told us they were largely unfamiliar with the research that has been conducted on the impact of the media on children. With this newsletter, we hope to change that.

Functioning as a link between academia and the creative community, the newsletter is dedicated to keeping advertisers, advertising professionals, television writers and producers and network executives abreast of current research on the media as it pertains to children. We hope it will serve as a practical, engaging resource for those who create, distribute and sponsor the media children enjoy. We welcome your comments and suggestions.

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Your job is to capture the largest possible television audience.

You think you know what that audience wants to watch.

And when they're watching.

You create or schedule or distribute or sponsor programs for that audience that tend to follow a formula.

The audience is children.

And you think you have no choice.

This is the dilemma examined in the first study designed to measure the **quality** of children's television and to determine how many quality television programs there are for kids.

Since Howdy Doody captured the hearts and imaginations of the nation's children, television has been a powerful magnet for young viewers. But Howdy and the other standard bearers of early children's television might be surprised at the diversity of their counterparts in today's television landscape. Now, karate-chopping freedom fighters, talking babies, and comic book superheroes dominate the kids' TV schedule.

Certainly, the phenomenal success of Nickelodeon and the Fox Kids Network has contributed to the increase in the overall **amount** of children's programming being broadcast. But how do the networks and other cable outlets measure up with respect to both the quantity and quality of the children's shows they carry?

Dr. Amy B. Jordan and Dr. Kathleen Hall Jamieson of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania addressed these questions within the context of widely held television and advertising industry beliefs about the economic and creative constraints of children's programming. This first-of-its kind study — *"The State of Children's Television: An Examination of Quantity, Quality and Industry Beliefs"* — was released last summer with data gathered from a content analysis of three days of children's programming, a national phone survey of 1205 parents and 308 children, interviews with 16 key individuals, and current Nielsen ratings. The findings suggest that there are both encouraging and troubling trends in children's television.

Perhaps there <u>are</u> choices.

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The State of Children's Television:

An Examination of Quantity, Quality and Industry Beliefs

Questions

- **What is a quality program?**
- **How much programming is available for children?**
- **How much of it is high quality?**
- **Where can the high-quality programming be found?**
- **Can high-quality programming be fostered in a competitive environment?**
- **What are parents' opinions?**
- **How do those in the industry feel about children's TV?**

What is Quality?

At the heart of the debate surrounding children's television is the elusive concept of "quality." When it comes to kids' TV, the phrase "quality programming" is often bandied about as though an official definition of quality exists. But the FCC has never defined it. Neither did Congress when it passed the Children's Television Act. Absent a common understanding of what quality is, it remains virtually impossible to reach consensus on how *much* quality programming is available to children today. Parents, kids, broadcasters, advertisers and TV producers have been left to judge for themselves — leading to confusion, controversy and conflict.

This study measures quality by determining whether a program ***contains positive elements and avoids negative content***. Since many programs with relevant social messages also show characters engaged in aggressive and unsafe behaviors, the measure further assesses the extent to which the positive elements outweigh the negative.

The measure contains two components:

Quality Index

Drawing on the extensive literature on the effects of television on children and interviews with children's advocates and industry insiders, the researchers identified ten program elements that either contribute to or detract from the level of quality in a children's program. Coders assigned points to each program based upon the presence of the quality contributors and absence of the detractors. Programs with higher scores were the better programs.

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Quality Contributors

- content understandable and appropriate for the target audience
- an enriching or pro-social lesson or theme that is clear and understandable
- a lesson integral to the story and/or is pervasive throughout the program
- diversity in characters
- creative and engaging techniques and storytelling devices

Quality Detractors

- verbal or physical violence
- sex or sexual innuendo
- gender, ethnic or racial stereotyping
- "bad" language
- uncontradicted images of characters engaged in unsafe behavior

Subjective Measure

So that the numbers-driven quality index did not obscure the subtle positive or negative nuances of a program, coders further rated each show subjectively. A *positive* rating was assigned if the coder would encourage a child to watch the

"If you have producers of integrity who know how to spend their money, it absolutely does not have to be more money to produce high-quality shows." ■ Children's programming producer

program. A *negative* rating indicated that a coder would discourage a child from watching the show. A *neutral* rating meant that the coder would neither encourage nor discourage viewing.

The two quality measures were weighted equally and programs received a final quality score. **High quality** programs typically presented educational content (whether of a social or academic nature) within an entertaining format. **Low quality** shows were largely entertainment oriented, had little educational content, an abundance of violence, stereotyped characters and other problems. **Moderate quality** programs were generally innocuous — containing very little educational or problematic material.

The 366 programs evaluated for this study generally represent what is available to children in an urban market on a typical weekday and weekend.

Conclusion

A rapidly expanding children's television industry is learning that entertaining high-quality programs can engage a young audience *and* turn a profit. Today, there are more choices for children and parents than ever before. On-screen and behind the scenes, major Hollywood players are devoting their talent and creativity to kids' programs. New formats, experimentation, niche programming and careful audience research are gradually changing the face of children's television. And advertisers are demonstrating their willingness to support the new programming.

Although we have left Howdy's "Golden Age" of television behind, with the continued commitment and cooperation of broadcasters, producers and advertisers, the best days of children's TV may still lay ahead.

Of the 366 programs evaluated for this study: 38% were judged to be high quality, and 25% were moderate quality, 37% were low quality.

New Media FROM THE

Children's TV is a tough business: *What are the industry constraints?*

Competition: The battle for ratings cannot be ignored. To win the largest audience, broadcasters often stick with the tried and true. New programs that buck the prevailing trends first have to prove themselves in early and late dayparts.

Environment: In the world of children's TV, broadcasters must deliver ratings--and advertisers buy dayparts, not programs. Under that pressure, broadcasters are hesitant to segment the audience by age, gender, or interest.

Targeting: The largest children's audience is the 6 to 11 year-olds. It is more difficult for high-quality (and educational) programs to span that broad age range than it is for action oriented programs.

Profitability: Children's programming provides narrow profit margins. Profits are boosted by product tie-ins and acquisition of existing programs. This limits the desirability of new programs that don't present obvious licensing opportunities.

Solutions

Create excellent programs that children will want to watch.

Family Forum

To guide their children's television viewing effectively, parents want to know when and where quality programs are broadcast.

Poll results reveal that parents have vastly different perceptions of the quality of the programming available for pre-school and school-age children. While 65% of the parents believe that younger kids have the best programs, only 15% believe that the programs for school-age kids are the best. Similarly, parents of pre-school children are generally pleased with the programs available for their children. But parents of school-age children report that they struggle to identify quality programs for their kids.

Parents of school-age kids struggle to identify quality programs for their children

Parents of school-age children face further challenges in ensuring that their children consume a balanced television diet. Although school-age kids have a large amount of programming aimed at them, the study found that the shows are primarily low quality — teeming with violence, gender and ethnic stereotyping and other troubling content. These parents note that if there are good programs on TV, they don't know where to find them.

▶ Location, Location, Location

Timing is everything. Scheduling determines the playing field.

Since competition can drive out quality, try cooperative counter-programming.

▶ Promotion

Entertainment programs are heavily promoted. Large budgets are committed for marketing these programs through an array of effective outlets — cereal boxes, on-air ads and fast food restaurants.

Do the same for high-quality children's programs and watch what happens.

▶ Licensing and Marketing

The synergy created in the promotion/licensing/marketing arenas could boost children's and parents' awareness of programs. It has worked for Sesame Street. And it has worked for Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

Increase viewer awareness while increasing the flow of money for production and promotion of high quality programs.

▶ Outreach

High-quality children's programs need to be identified as worthy of parents' and children's attention. Engage advocacy groups, home and school associations and local TV critics to spotlight high-quality programs.

Let parents know where and when the high-quality programs air.

▶ Commitment

Provide enough time (at least 26 shows) to build audience and give merchandisers, advertisers and corporate underwriters a clue that the program will be around.

Cheers, one of the most successful programs of all time, did poorly its first year.

▶ Training and Dialogue

Train those who write and produce the shows; maintain a dialogue with policy makers, industry executives and other key decision makers.

Get past misconceptions about the child audience and explore creative ways to "educate" while entertaining.

▶ Opportunity

The 3-hour rule will take effect in September. Broadcasters and producers can take this opportunity to change the direction of children's television.

Create, schedule, distribute and sponsor children's programs that break the mold.

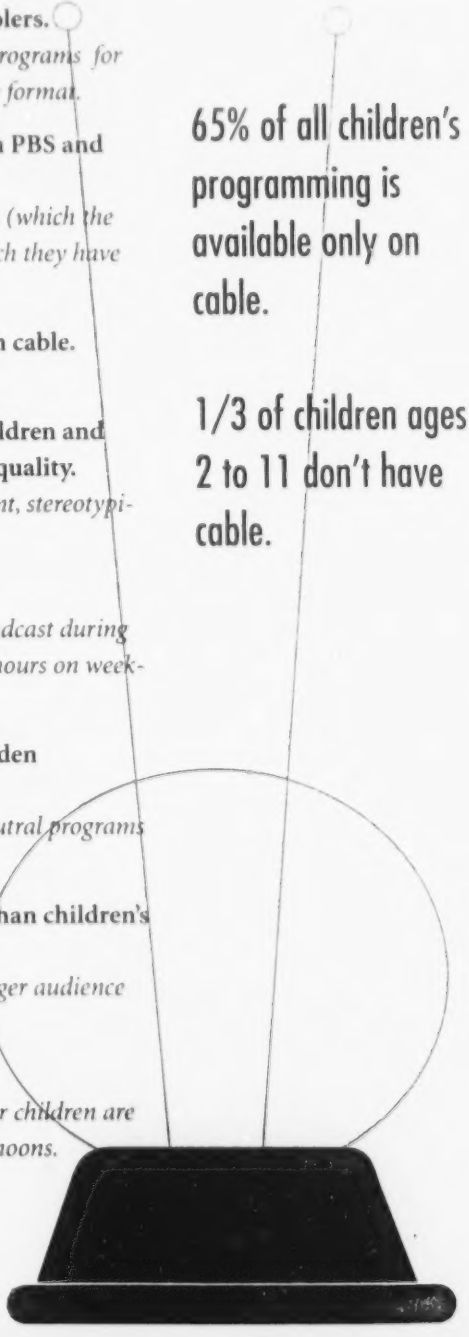
Findings: A Closer Look

Some of the findings are promising. For example, researchers found that there are a large number of children's programs available on network, cable and public TV. In addition, 63% of the shows in the sample were judged to be of high or moderate quality. But a closer look reveals some troubling aspects of children's television.

- **A large number of high-quality programs are available for preschoolers.**
  This study indicates that commercial, public and cable stations all offer programs for young children that contain social and academic lessons in a high-quality format.
- **High-quality children's programs are available, but concentrated on PBS and on cable.**
  One third of America's children have access only to commercial television (which the study judges to be predominantly low-quality) and public television (which they have outgrown by the time they get to first grade.)
- **Sixty-five percent of all children's programming is available only on cable.**
  Approximately 1/3 of children ages 2 to 11 don't have access to cable.
- **The largest share of children's programming targets school-age children and the majority of the network programming for this audience is low-quality.**
  The majority of programs for school-age children were judged to be violent, stereotypical and lacking in variety.
- **Low-quality programs for school-age children get high ratings.**
  The study found that the majority of the low-quality programs were broadcast during "prime" late morning hours on the weekend and before and after school hours on weekdays — when school-age kids are most likely to be in the audience.
- **During the favorable parts of the schedule, low-quality, violence-laden programs dominate.**
  It is unusual to find programs that appeal to girls' interests or gender neutral programs in the favorable parts of the schedule.
- **Children are much more likely to watch general audience sitcoms than children's programs.**
  Nielsen data reveal that among school-age kids, family sitcoms win a larger audience share than even the top-ranked children's programs.
- **High-quality programs have a small audience.**
  High-quality children's programs are typically aired at a time when older children are not likely to be watching TV — early morning hours and weekend afternoons.

65% of all children's programming is available only on cable.

1/3 of children ages 2 to 11 don't have cable.



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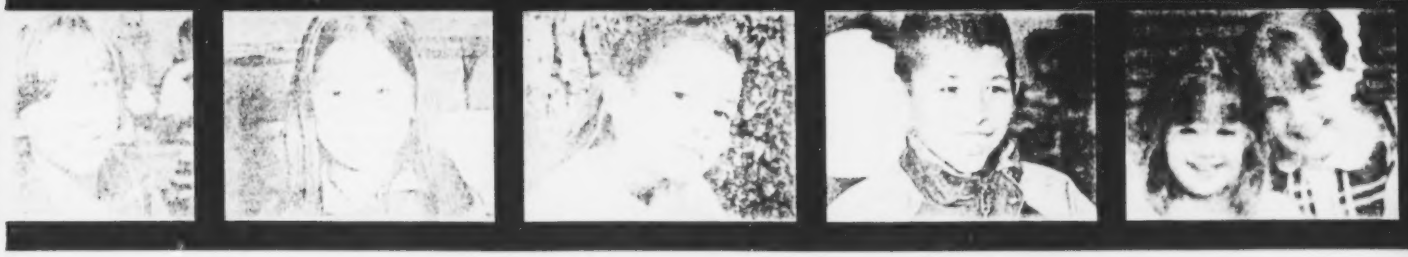

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About Children Now

Children Now is a nonpartisan, independent voice for America's children. Using innovative research and communications strategies, Children Now promotes pioneering solutions to problems facing America's children. Children Now is financed through foundation grants, individual donations and support from the corporate community.

The Children & the Media Program was established at Children Now in 1993. The goal of the program is to improve the quality of news and entertainment media both for and about children. We work to accomplish that goal through outreach to members of the media industry, independent research, and development of public policy.

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Current Research on Children and the Media

Selling Stereotypes

Advertising Images of Girls and Women

MediaConference

Last April in Los Angeles, Children Now held its fourth annual media conference to examine images of girls in the media and the messages these portrayals send girls. Attendees provided candid insights into the conventional wisdom and bottom-line realities that guide decisions about media portrayals of girls and women. Keynote speakers actor Geena Davis, Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala, and *Reviving Ophelia* author Dr. Mary Pipher challenged the industry to create richer, fuller, more realistic portrayals of girls. And young women voiced their desire to see female characters who are as physically and ethnically diverse, intelligent, athletic, confident, strong and ambitious as they are. For more information about the conference, please call (510) 763-2444 or check our website at www.childrennow.org.

Advertising is designed to sell products. In the process, ads also "sell" aspirations and communicate concepts of acceptable behavior and gender roles. Just as today's kids use ads to navigate the vast sea of our consumer culture — and in the process largely determine how billions of dollars are spent annually — so do they readily consume the subtle messages sent by the thousands of ads they see each year. Advertising, with its daily repetition and high accessibility, is a truly powerful medium.

The influence of advertising on children's development is hardly surprising. Social learning theory, developed by Stanford University psychologist Dr. Albert Bandura, suggests that children begin to learn personality and behavior patterns by observing and imitating their parents. Further research indicates that children are more likely to imitate same-sex role models — boys choose to mirror their fathers, while girls look to their mothers — and tend to remember more about same-sex examples. But research shows that kids also emulate the behavior of other attractive models, especially when the behavior is rewarded. And therein lies the media's unique power. Nowhere else is the heady combination of physical beauty and personal success portrayed as appealingly and persuasively.

As children begin to form their gender identities, they take cues from the media, including advertisements, as to how boys and girls should behave. Media also show them how women and men relate to each other — a lesson that is first played out on the school yard and in the classroom and, later, in the workplace and the family. From childhood to adolescence, stereotyped images of females and males in advertising are reinforced in the children's television and prime-time programs kids avidly watch. The result is a continuum of limiting messages that often tell girls and boys alike that female appearance is central, that boys can do and achieve things girls can't, and that boys have more value than girls.

Ads provide children with role models whose behaviors are reinforced — these filmed examples are as effective as real-life ones in teaching kids social behaviors.

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Advertising Images of Girls and Women

If it's beer, babes, and bachelors, it must be Sunday.

An analysis of gender portrayals in advertising during daytime, prime time, and weekend programming revealed that these images vary with the intended primary audience.

- **In daytime, when homemakers are the primary audience, women are shown cooking, cleaning and taking care of children. Men make cameo appearances as husbands, professionals or spokesmen.** ***Call it a throwback to the '50s.***
- **On weekends, when men are targeted, women are more likely to appear in subservient roles or as sex objects and models. Men are usually portrayed as fun-loving, carefree, and single.** ***Call it fantasy and escapism.***
- **During prime time, when the audience is more balanced, women are more often shown in positions of authority and in settings away from home. To appeal to women who work outside the home, advertisers present more equitable gender portrayals.** ***Call it a reflection of reality.***

(Craig, S.R., 1992)

A Girl's Place is in the Home?

In 1994, Dr. Lois Smith, professor of Marketing at the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater, published a study of gender differences in children's advertising. Through an examination of ads featuring only boys or girls, Dr. Smith sought to determine the extent to which children's advertising depicts sex-stereotyped behavior.

Previous analyses of children's advertising had discovered significant differences in the ways girls and boys are portrayed. A number of studies conducted during the seventies and early eighties concluded that:

- the vast majority of ads with only one gender feature boys;
- ads with female models are usually for appearance-related products;
- most ads during children's programming are predominantly male-oriented; and
- male narrators greatly outnumber their female counterparts.

Drawing upon these findings, Dr. Smith examined the advertisements broadcast during one week of after-school and Saturday morning children's programming. The results indicated that despite some improvements, female images in advertising have not come such a long way.

Of the total number of single-gender ads in the study, sixty-seven percent featured boys — more than double the number with only girls. In addition to commercials for toys traditionally targeted at boys, boys also frequently appeared in ads for so-called "neutral" products — like candy, cereal, and soft drinks — that have an equal appeal to both genders. None of the ads for these neutral products used only girls. Further, while women narrated ads for girls' toys only, men narrated every boys' ad (and the neutral product ads) as well as some of the ads directed at girls. Simply put, women can talk only to girls, but men can talk to boys and girls.

Boys in children's TV ads are also stereotyped — often being shown as aggressive, competitive trouble-makers. Ads rarely show them as nurturing or sharing.

Finally, while ads with boys took place in a wide variety of imaginative, fanciful settings, more than 70% of the girls' ads were set inside the home. Boys were shown in the home only 27% of the time. In the rare instances when girls were shown in *fantasy* settings, the ads were awash in pink and set against soft, fluffy backdrops. In contrast, fantasy ads featuring boys were full of exciting activities, like battling inside a video game, exploring a land of giant dinosaurs, and careening over a chocolate waterfall.

One encouraging finding from the study was the types of activities in which girls and boys were engaged. Earlier studies had found that boys in television commercials were much more likely than girls to be portrayed as physically active. In this more recent study, both boys and girls were shown being active and passive. They rode bikes and read books, played ball and watched TV. Girls, however, were still less likely to be shown being active.

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"Research has demonstrated that both men and women perceive female voices as equally effective to male voices (in ads) ...no consistent preference has been found for the male voice of authority."

■ (Courtney, A.E. & Whipple, T.W., 1983.)

Reel Beauty

By the time girls reach adolescence, they have abandoned children's programming for more sophisticated prime-time material. Their media appetites also expand beyond television to include larger servings of movies, music, and teen magazines. With this comes increased exposure to media messages, including those sent through advertising.

The persuasive power of advertising has an impact on teens as well as young children. As adolescents are redefining themselves and their relationships, dealing with their changing bodies, and envisioning their futures, advertising — and the media it supports — often send them messages that could limit their aspirations, undermine their self-worth and endanger their health.

Professors Daniel J. Bretl and Joanne Cantor of the University of Wisconsin examined the findings of every study on portrayals of women and men in television advertising conducted over a fifteen year period. For comparative purposes, the researchers also analyzed a 1985 sample of prime-time commercials.

The results were mixed. While men and women were portrayed fairly equally as primary characters in prime-time ads, women were still more likely to be shown in the home, as product users rather than authorities, and as spokespersons for home-use products (including food, household items, and body care). However, the researchers also found that men were being depicted in these ways more frequently.

On one critical measure of gender equity in television commercials the researchers found no improvement: male narrators were still being used approximately 90% of the time. When women did narrate commercials, the products were usually "feminine"— those used to pamper the body and enhance appearance.

Fast forward to 1996. Over the last eight years, have the representations of women and men in advertising improved? A groundbreaking study by Children Now and the Kaiser Family Foundation examined messages sent to girls across six media including television commercials and advertisements in teen magazines. Findings confirmed that in the advertisements teenage girls are most likely to see, differences remain in the ways men and women are portrayed.

In television commercials, men outnumbered women 58% to 42%. Seventy percent of the ads targeted towards women were for appearance-related products, compared to just 9% of the ads geared towards men. While 26% of women in TV commercials received comments on their looks, only 7% of men were the recipients of such remarks. Finally, 32% of the women in TV commercials were "thin," compared to only 6% of men.

Because teen magazines are written for girls, the vast majority of their ads did feature women. Eighty-one percent of the ads were for appearance-related products such as cosmetics, clothing and toiletries. Overall, both TV and magazine ads for women appealed to beauty, self-improvement, and youthfulness much more than those for men.

The Body Beautiful

Studies have found that the emphasis on beauty and thinness in TV commercials can impact how girls view themselves and the importance they place on being attractive. Consider the following:

- **Teens who watched a series of ads that used sex appeal, beauty and youth as selling points were more likely to say that being beautiful was "personally desirable" and important to "be popular with men" than those who watched ads without such appeals.** (Tan, A., 1979)
- **The media's presentation of the ideal female body is internalized by young women who try to change their bodies to match the ideal.** (Banner, L., 1986)
- **Thirty-one percent of nine year-olds think they are too fat, while 81% of ten year-olds diet.** (Wolf, N., 1991)
- **A woman's perception of how large or thin she is can be altered by watching less than thirty minutes of TV.** (Myers, P. et. al., 1992)

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Life Lessons

What do these advertising images of boys, girls, women and men teach kids? Researchers suggest that advertisers' disproportionate use of boys in ads creates the impression that boys are more valued than girls. The almost exclusive reliance upon men as TV commercial narrators implies that the voice of authority is patently male.

The emphasis on female appearance tells girls that their *physical* self may be more important than their intellectual and emotional selves. In particular, the idolization of thinness creates an immense pressure to be slim that can damage girls' self-esteem, distort their sense of body image, and contribute to disordered eating. And these messages also affect boys, telling them that girls are first and foremost a pretty package — something to behold, but not necessarily to respect.

Women primp. Men work. Women flirt. Men achieve. The lessons girls and boys learn from these media depictions can help shape their perceptions of themselves, and each other, for a lifetime.

Certainly, advertising alone does not bear the responsibility for the creation of gender stereotypes. Yet images of girls and women in print and TV ads can perpetuate these stereotypes. Businesses use advertising to encourage consumers to buy their products. But the pursuit of profit can be reconciled with advertisements that employ messages and images that are inspiring and affirming. Both girls and boys deserve to see them. ■

NowMedia

Excerpts from remarks by Don Pettit, President of Sassaby Cosmetics, at the 1997 Children Now media conference.

There is a lot of conventional wisdom built up around beauty advertising that has created a very strong stereotype of what a successful beauty model will look like. Conventional wisdom says you need to advertise with specific beauty looks and it can get very restricting. Where does that come from?

It comes from what works. As people put out advertising, they measure reaction in both sales and research and people play back, 'I want to look like that, I don't want to look like that.' And I think it has built up a body of fairly conservative knowledge that's odd in such a creative, aspirational and desire-based industry.

"It's about what's at stake and where you can take a risk. Do you go with the conventional wisdom or do you challenge it?"

But we can't stop at the advertisers. They are responding to the marketplace, and I don't think you can separate that. Most of them are reacting not to an arbitrary decision, but to what has worked in the past, what has built business. They have statistics that say, 'When I put Cindy Crawford in a TV commercial, I sell a lot of lipstick. If I put someone else in there, I might not.'

I feel very strongly that we need to be more inclusive in the beauty industry and genuinely find a way for more people to be able to find themselves. Yet you have to remember that we are delivering a product that is about aspiration and looking better.

It is important to remember that we are at a time of historic opportunity because we have a whole new generation of teenage girls coming along, more than there were at the height of the baby boom. Now is the time to make changes and take chances because they haven't been as bombarded as their predecessors. There is a window of opportunity to test new ideas.

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Solutions for Positive Images

Relying upon tried and true techniques is always easier than forging new ground. But you can take advantage of the power of advertising to show children a broad range of roles and behaviors for males and females by:

- **Increasing the use of female narrators for products that aren't appearance-related.**
- **Showing girls being active and engaging in activities outside the home.**
- **Creating more ads for gender-neutral products that only use girls or women.**
- **Showing women working in a wide variety of career settings.**
- **Depicting more women as "experts," rather than product users.**
- **Increasing the use of ethnically diverse women and girls.**
- **Expanding the range of body types for models used in ads.**

"The presence of advertising is not the problem. Advertising brings a wealth of information to children at the same time as it financially supports programming aimed at them. The problem is the absence of competing messages and values about gender roles."

■ Dr. Lois J. Smith

Trendsetters...

Some advertisers are challenging gender stereotypes in the ways they portray girls and women.

- *Life* cereal recently announced the selection of their latest "spokeskid" — a young girl who will pick up where "Mikey" left off in the '70s.
- *Reebok* showcases the strength and determination of female athletes in their print ads. Real women, real workouts, real profits.
- *Sassaby* cosmetics uses the slogan, "Real beauty comes from within. The outside is for you to make-up." By using models who reflect the rich ethnic and physical diversity of American girls, *Sassaby* has struck a chord with teens.
- *Chevrolet* employs actor Lea Thompson from the hit sitcom *Caroline in the City* as their spokesperson. While other automobile makers have used women models in their ads, Chevrolet's campaign uses a woman as the spokesperson for their entire line.
- *Levi's Jeans for Women* uses a hip mix of empowering slogans and unconventional images to target the young women's market. One ad asked, "The princess dream. The pony dream. The pretty bride dream. Are you ready for the kick butt dream?"

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Written by Lisa P. White
Designed by Dennis Johnson

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Media Now
CHILDREN
Current Research on Children and the Media

Mass Consumption

Advertising and Children's Health

Children are surrounded by advertising. On television, in magazines, at the movies, on-line and on billboards, children are encouraged to consume. And consume they do. Not only do children influence the purchases their parents make, they also spend lots of their own money — from allowances and part-time jobs — on the latest fashions, the coolest new video games and their favorite snacks.

No doubt, this is music to advertisers' ears. After all, they advertise in the hope that they will be able to shape desires, influence preferences, change buying habits and create brand loyalty. But are advertisers aware that their ads also have an impact on children's health? In a number of key areas, research exists linking ads to serious health concerns for children.

From smoking to body image, there is strong evidence that advertising influences children's habits and attitudes. Many advertisers recognize this connection and proactively use their ads to communicate positive messages. For example, the Body Shop and Kellogg are bucking the 'thin trend' by telling women that they should strive to lead a healthy lifestyle, not to look like a supermodel.

There is no inherent business trade-off between healthy messages and profits. As advertisers craft their messages and create their images with an eye to enhancing their bottom-lines, they can also be mindful of the unique power and potential they have to influence children.

"Believe it or not, all of you are in the public health business. You fill the vacuum which was once occupied by traditional institutions like family and schools. Children wear your clothes, tape your shows, read your magazines and buy your products with fierce loyalty. They're watching and listening for hours on end. The media has kids' attention. The question is: What are you going to tell them?"

Donna Shalala, *U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services*

Inside...

This issue of Media Now examines the connection between advertising and children's health.

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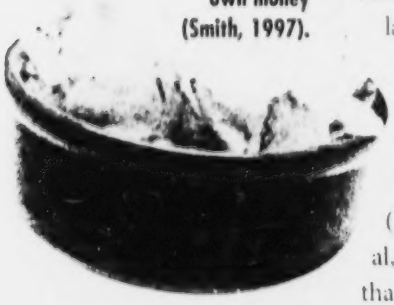
Advertising and Children's Health

Food

Pediatricians and nutritionists agree that rising obesity among young people is closely linked to an increasingly sedentary lifestyle in which TV, video games and computers are fast becoming the leisure activities of choice. Of course, a lack of physical activity is just one side of the weight gain equation. The other is an unbalanced diet that's heavy in high-fat foods.

fact: **Twenty-five percent of American children and adolescents are obese — double the number who were overweight 30 years ago. Each year, the obesity rate among kids increases by 1%.**

Snack foods, gum, candy and other sweets are the products children purchase most often with their own money (Smith, 1997).



Advertising plays a role in expanding children's waistlines in three primary ways: 1) the types of products targeted at kids; 2) the influence of ads on children's food *preferences*; and 3) the extent to which these preferences actually impact children's food *consumption*.

Studies have found that the vast majority of television ads targeted at children are for food products and services (Barcus, 1975; Ogletree et al, 1990). Of those ads, most are for candy, sweetened cereals and fast-food restaurants. But does exposure to such ads translate into requests for those foods?

The research indicates that it does. Ads for junk food and sweets have been found to influence children's short and long-term food preferences (Atkin and Gibson, 1978; Goldberg et al, 1978). Furthermore, there is evidence that children's television viewing (and therefore their exposure to commercials) is positively related to their consumption of candy and snack foods (Atkin, 1975).

The more TV kids watch, the less active they are, the more commercials they see and the more they ask for — and eat— foods that are high in fat and low in nutritional value.

Body Image

Paradoxically, at the same time that some ads sell snack foods to kids, others emphasize a female body image that is unrealistically thin. While children are encouraged to indulge in high-fat foods, girls are also given the strong message that they must not get fat. These two contradictory messages (combined with intense social pressure to be thin) can lead to unhealthy eating behaviors.

fact: **Teen girls are twice as likely to think they are overweight (44%) and to be trying to lose weight (60%) than teen boys. Ninety-five percent of the people diagnosed with eating disorders are female.**

Print and television advertising's use of models who weigh 23% less than the average American woman creates a standard of beauty that is unattainable by most women. Studies have shown that when women compare themselves to pictures of thin models, they feel depressed, guilty, ashamed and dissatisfied with their bodies (Irving, 1990; Stice & Shaw, 1994).

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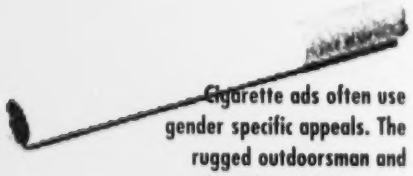
Tobacco

fact: **A recent study found that the rate of adolescent tobacco use (which includes cigarettes, cigars and smokeless tobacco) has increased sharply in the past 6 years from 27.5% to 36.4%. The rate among African-American teens — once the lowest — has almost doubled.**

Recent disclosures of internal tobacco company memos have revealed what public health experts and tobacco control advocates have long suspected — for years, cigarette advertising has specifically targeted young people. And the research suggests that these ads have contributed to the initiation of many teen smokers.

A 1994 Centers for Disease Control study concluded that cigarette advertising appears to increase adolescents' risk of smoking by glamorizing smoking and depicting smokers as self-assured, healthy, youthful, sexy and cool. Not coincidentally, the two most heavily advertised brands — *Camel* and *Marlboro* — are also the most popular among teen smokers.

But the allure of cigarette ads is not confined to adolescents. Studies have found that younger children who pay closer attention to cigarette ads are much more likely to view smoking favorably and to become smokers. In fact, one study found that twice as many children as adults were able to associate Joe Camel with *Camel* cigarettes and found the ads appealing (DiFranza et al, 1991).



Cigarette ads often use gender specific appeals. The rugged outdoorsman and the debonair ladies man promote cigarettes to boys by selling machismo and sex appeal. Super-thin fashion models promote cigarettes to girls by selling sophistication and weight control.

Alcohol

Children see approximately 1,000 to 2,000 TV ads for beer and wine annually (Strasburger, 1989). Beer commercials — which teens list among their favorites by age 16 — have an especially strong impact on adolescents' attitudes toward drinking. Researchers contend that beer ads communicate the deceptive message that drinking is a fun, harmless activity free from major health risks.

fact: **Although the teen drinking rate has declined since the eighties, more than 75% of high school students have consumed alcohol, 50% drink on occasion and 25% engage in heavy drinking.**

Studies have found that alcohol ads — through the use of attractive young people, fun social situations, popular music and mascots—both target young people and influence them (Aitken et al, 1988; Buchanan & Lev, 1990). One survey of adolescents found that exposure to television alcohol ads was more strongly correlated with drinking than demographic factors such as family, gender, socioeconomic status and age (Atkin, Hocking & Block, 1984). ■

Beer companies' use of "spokescharacters"— whether animated or real — in commercials and on promotional merchandise can increase children's awareness of and affinity for their products. For example, 80% of 5th and 6th graders who could identify "Spuds McKenzie" were able to match him with *Budweiser* (Wallack et al, 1990).

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NowMedia

Health Lessons from "E.R."

Dr. Neal Baer, "E.R." writer and producer

County General Hospital, the fictitious Chicago setting for the show "E.R.," is a microcosm for the kind of health problems confronting patients and health care professionals across the country...

Nationally, debate rages over topics like the causes and prevention of domestic violence; providing confidential medical care to pregnant teenagers or those with sexually transmitted diseases, and access to health care for single mothers and their children. This is the stuff of real-life drama. It makes good television, too...

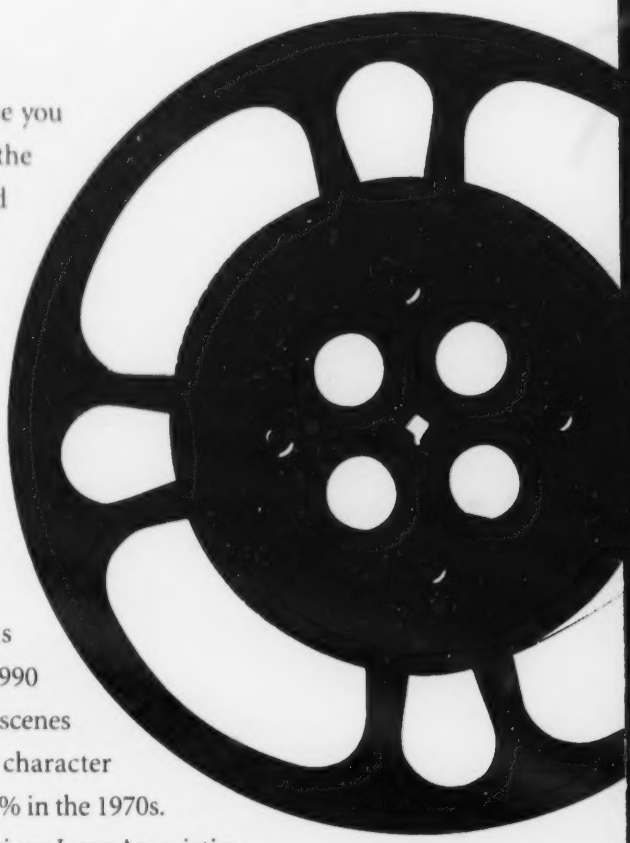
As a writer, I naturally want viewers of "E.R." to care about and identify with the people on the show. But beyond that, an important goal is for the audience to learn something. "E.R." has consistently earned top Nielsen ratings, but we were particularly pleased by the results of a recent poll by the Kaiser Family Foundation. It found that a majority of viewers say they learn and talk about important health care issues by watching "E.R." Nearly a third reported that they get information from the show that helps them make choices about their own or their family's health care.

A doctor recently told us that our story line involving Jeanie Boulet, the doctor's assistant, prompted several of his own HIV positive patients to consider going on one of the new anti-AIDS drug regimens.

Now if we could just write a story line around a cure for HIV.

Originally published in the *New York Times*, June 22, 1997

Hollywood's Smoke Screen



The last time you went to the movies, did it seem as if more characters were lighting up? If so, you were right. According to a 1997 study by the University of California at San Francisco, half the top-grossing films released between 1990 and 1995 contained scenes in which a lead character smoked, up from 29% in the 1970s. A study by the American Lung Association found that 77% of 133 movies released in 1996 contained at least one scene in which someone smoked.

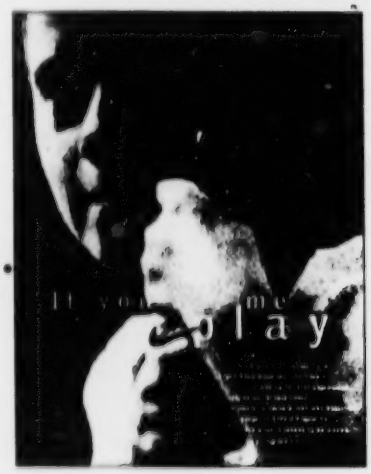
Like advertisements for cigarettes, the way smoking is depicted in movies sends young people the message that smoking is sexy, rebellious and cool. Movies rarely show the health consequences of smoking — no lung cancer, heart disease or emphysema. Likewise, cigarette-puffing action heroes aren't shown gasping for breath as they chase down bad guys. And attractive young lovers aren't shown suffering with bad breath and stained teeth.

The latest film in this disturbing trend— *Titanic*— also happens to be the biggest international box-office success ever. In contrast, *Star Wars*, the movie *Titanic* recently dethroned, also revolved around heroic young characters — but none of them smoked.

Solutions

Recently, several major advertisers have launched high-profile ad campaigns that communicate positive health messages. For Kellogg's *Special K* cereal, this represents a shift away from a more problematic marketing strategy. No more preening, reed-thin models, now the focus is on healthy eating, exercise and body satisfaction. The Body Shop's 'Ruby' ads lampoon fashion dolls and the national obsession with supermodels. And Nike extols the physical and mental health benefits of girls playing sports. These campaigns reflect advertising at its best — creative, innovative *and* positive.

The Body Shop



Nike

She may be 5'10" and ultra-thin. She may be 5'2" with love handles. The truth is, looking your best is about being strong and healthy, not looking like somebody else. Exercise. Refuse to skip meals. Start with a balanced breakfast and go from there. *Kellogg's® Special K®* cereal is a fat-free source of eleven essential nutrients, so it's a sensible way to start your day. After all, perfection is about accepting yourself the way you are. And there isn't any one of us who should aspire to anything less.

Special K®

Reshape your attitude

Kellogg's Special K

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Iain Watson	*HAL Investments, Inc.*

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Written by Lisa P. White
Designed by Dennis Johnson Design

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Current Research on Children and the Media

A Special Report

Children and Television Violence

The "V-chip" and TV Ratings

When President Clinton signed the "v-chip" into law as part of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the issue of television violence was thrust into the spotlight. The v-chip is intended to give parents a tool to help them better guide their children's television viewing. While it won't be available in new television sets until mid-1998 at the earliest, the television industry has implemented a ratings system that provides advance information about the content of TV programs. Signifying the extent to which violence was a major concern, an extra rating for violence was added to kids' programs. In light of the historic agreement between the TV industry and children's advocacy groups to add this rating, we decided to take a new look at media violence and children.

For decades, television programs have relied heavily on the dynamic duo of action and violence to attract audiences. Ever since Marshall Matt Dillon strapped on his six-shooter to protect the fair citizens of Dodge City, American television viewers have been inundated with violent images. Although most of the violence in television's early days was tame by today's standards, the proliferation of shoot-outs and fistfights in prime-time did not go unnoticed even then. As early as 1952, when the first in a long line of Congressional hearings on TV violence was held, political leaders and social scientists had begun to question the influence of televised violence on children and adolescents.

In the early sixties, in the face of an escalating juvenile crime rate and growing urban unrest, researchers began studying the impact of violence on television. When the first studies indicated that viewing television violence could lead children to behave aggressively, many in the industry disputed the findings. As study after study continued to make a connection between TV violence and real-life aggression, a broad coalition of academics, physicians, mental health professionals, politicians and children's advocates petitioned the television industry to reduce the amount of violence in prime-time and children's programming.

Although the harmful effects of media violence are not restricted to the young, there is particular concern about the impact of the steady consumption of violent images on children. According to one estimate, by the time most children leave elementary school they will have seen approximately 8,000 murders and more than 100,000 other acts of violence on television. Such staggering numbers have contributed to a growing public perception that violence on TV has become more pervasive, more graphic and more problematic.

In the early sixties, in the face of an escalating juvenile crime rate and growing urban unrest, researchers began studying the impact of violence on television.

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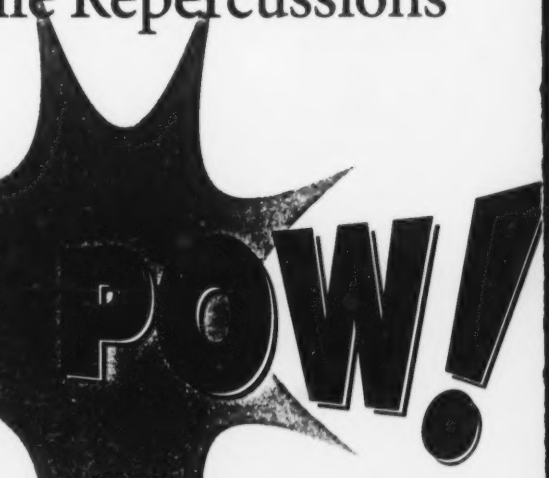
Make-Believe Violence, Real-Life Repercussions



From Anvils to X-Men: Violence in Kids' Programming

Today, two major studies — the National Television Violence Study (NTVS) and the UCLA Television Violence Report — track the amount of violence on television. NTVS, a joint effort of several prominent research universities, measures the violence on network, independent local, public and cable television. The UCLA project, conducted by the UCLA Center for Communication Policy, focuses on violence on network TV.

Because the two studies have different approaches to defining violence, they reached slightly different conclusions about the amount of violence in children's programs during the 1995-96 season:

- **NTVS found that most of the "high risk" portrayals of violence on TV occurred in children's programs where attractive characters inflicted justified, realistic, remorseless violence on victims who appeared to suffer few consequences. Basic cable channels targeted at the child audience carried the lion's share of these problematic portrayals.**
- **The UCLA study, which utilizes three violence categories — slapstick violence, tame combat violence and sinister combat violence — found that the majority of network kids' shows that contained violence fit into the slapstick category. Also, the number of sinister combat programs dropped from seven in the previous TV season to four.**

The strong correlation between media violence and increased aggressive behavior is acknowledged by much of the academic community and by many highly respected organizations, including the American Medical Association, the National Institute for Mental Health and the American Psychological Association. The cumulative findings of a vast body of research conducted since the 1960s have identified three primary harmful effects that can occur from sustained exposure to media violence:

Learning and Imitation

Numerous studies — using different methods, outcome measures and portrayals of violence — have demonstrated that children will imitate the aggressive behavior they see on television, especially if the behavior is rewarded. Additionally, the way in which the violence is portrayed may suggest to children that violence is the best or only way to resolve interpersonal conflicts. For example, in an early study, children who were shown *Batman* and *Superman* cartoons over a four week period were more likely to fight, break toys and play roughly than a control group which had watched *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood.* Moreover, children in the control group were more cooperative and willing to share with others (Stein & Friedrich, 1972).

Desensitization

Further research suggests that repeated exposure to violent images can decrease concern about real-world violence and diminish sympathy for victims of violence. In a seminal study, college students viewed films with scenes of violence against women over a period of five days. The researchers found that by the fifth day, the subjects reported being less disturbed by the images and less sympathetic towards a fictional sexual assault victim (Linz, Donnerstein & Penrod, 1984, 1987).

Fear

Researchers have found that people who watch a lot of violent TV have an exaggerated fear of being victimized and believe that the world is much more violent than it actually is. Although some researchers have raised doubts about its validity, "media cultivation effects" theory posits that television influences people's perceptions of the real world. Thus, a television world where assaults and murders are frequent occurrences translates into a belief in the possibility and probability of violence closer to home (Gerbner, 1969).

The research has also demonstrated that all portrayals of violence on television are not created equal. By changing key components or "contextual factors" of the portrayal, the potential for harmful effects can be reduced. *(see sidebar on next page)*

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"There is absolutely no doubt that higher levels of viewing violence on TV are correlated with increased aggressive behavior." ▪ American Psychological Association, 1985

Understanding TV

There has long been a belief in the industry — one shared by some parents — that cartoon violence is not harmful because it clearly is not "real." However, research shows that when it comes to children, reality is in the eye of the beholder.

Children's ability to understand what they see on television improves as they mature. In combination with personal experiences, their knowledge of the world and their familiarity with television, children's cognitive development has a significant impact on their ability to interpret what they see on TV and the way they respond to what they see.

In particular, there are three major differences between the thought processes of younger (3-7) and older (8-12) children that relate to television. First, young children make judgments based upon appearance, while older children are able to look beyond image to discern motives and feelings. Second, young children have difficulty distinguishing fantasy from reality, while older children are able to make that distinction. Finally, young children have trouble following plots and integrating the information communicated by television programs, while older children are able to use both explicit and implicit information in a program to link scenes together. Due to these differences, younger and older children often interpret the same television content quite differently.

For children, making the distinction between fantasy and reality in television programs is not a simple process. In fact, studies have found that children's judgment of television realism is multidimensional — informed by contextual cues such as program genre and production techniques as well as their knowledge of physical and social reality. Very young children, who are unable to readily make the distinction between fantasy and reality, tend to believe that everything they see on TV is real.

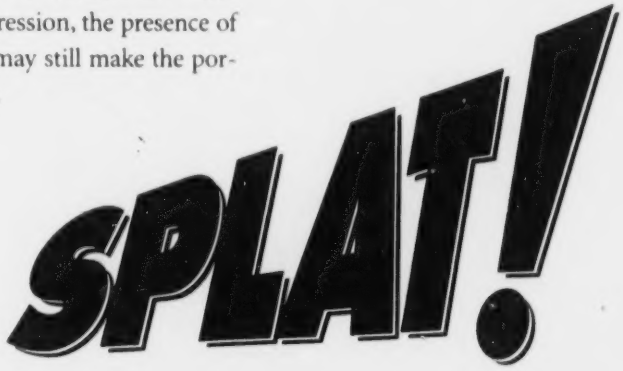
A recent study demonstrated that viewing the *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, a fantasy program about adolescent superheroes, increased aggression among elementary school children. (Boyatzis, et al, 1995)

The upshot is that violence in cartoons and other "fantasy" programs can be detrimental to young children who may think such programs are real and thus mimic the behavior they see. Furthermore, even if a child can correctly identify a program as fantasy, that does not mean the violent portrayal is harmless. Although perceived realistic portrayals of violence are more likely to foster aggression, the presence of other risk factors may still make the portrayal problematic.

The probability that a violent portrayal will lead to learned aggression, desensitization or fear increases when:

- **the perpetrator is an attractive character (a "good guy")**
- **the victim is sympathetic, someone with whom the audience can identify**
- **the violence is portrayed as justified**
- **characters use conventional weapons such as guns and knives**
- **the violence is graphic or the scene is lengthy**
- **the violence seems realistic**
- **the violence is glorified**
- **the perpetrator is either rewarded or not punished**
- **the pain and suffering associated with violence is not depicted**
- **violence is portrayed in a humorous context**

(National Television Violence Study, 1997)



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One such risk factor is the failure to show punishment for perpetrators of violence. If violence is depicted as having negative consequences, it is less likely that it will inspire aggression in the viewer. However, research indicates that for young children, the *timing* of the punishment is critical. When the commission of violent acts on television is separated from the punishment for those acts, young children are unable to connect the two events. While an older child would understand that the person who shoots someone at the beginning of a program is the same person who is jailed at the end, a young child may be left with the impression that the violent actions are not penalized.

Conclusion

Violence on television — whether in a cartoon or drama, whether it is portrayed humorously or seriously — can have a negative effect on viewers. And given their propensity for imitation, children are especially vulnerable to portrayals of violent behavior on TV. But just as TV can teach children aggression, it can also impart important lessons about the damage violence does to individuals, families and society. Likewise, TV can spotlight and validate non-violent means of resolving conflicts. And, interestingly, programs that use violence to increase awareness of its consequences or that show alternatives to violence can also increase ratings. ■

Laser guns blaze. Fists fly. Vehicles explode.

Welcome to "Fantasy Violence"

In the fast-paced world of action-adventure children's programs, where superheroes mete out swift, physical justice to nefarious villains, combative violence rules the day. Since some of the most popular children's programs are based on this formula, there is considerable concern about the impact of violence in cartoons and live-action programming on children.

When the industry set out to develop a television ratings system, child development experts stressed the importance of separate ratings for children's programming that acknowledged the cognitive developmental stages through which children progress.

Fantasy violence or combat violence? It depends on your perspective.

In response, the industry created two ratings specifically for children's programming: one for programs for all children (TV-Y) and one for those programs deemed "appropriate for children age 7 and older" (TV-Y7). As a result of last summer's ratings negotiations between the industry and advocacy groups, including Children Now, a third children's programming rating was created — TV-Y7-FV. The 'FV' (for fantasy violence) will be assigned to those programs where "fantasy violence may be more intense or more combative than other programs in this [TV-Y7] category."

One of the most contentious issues was the adoption of the term "fantasy" to describe this type of violence. Advocates, who maintained that "combat violence" was a much more accurate description, felt the word fantasy would confuse parents and give the incorrect impression that the violence was harmless.

Advocates are happy that, three months after the implementation of the revised ratings system, some of the most popular kids' programs — including *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, X-Men* and *The New Adventures of Batman/Superman* — are carrying the FV rating.

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Solutions: Responsible Portrayals

On average, children watch more than twenty hours of television per week. And fifty-four percent of kids have a television set in their bedroom. Thus, there are many opportunities for children to see violence on TV.

The authors of the National Television Violence Study and the UCLA Television Violence Report have developed a set of recommendations for the industry with respect to the portrayal of violence on TV. These recommendations include:

Produce more programs that do not rely upon violence as a plot device.

Increase the depiction of punishment for violent acts.

Show alternatives to violence for resolving conflicts.

Avoid the implication that violence is justified.

Show the negative short-term and long-term consequences of violence for victims, perpetrators and their families.

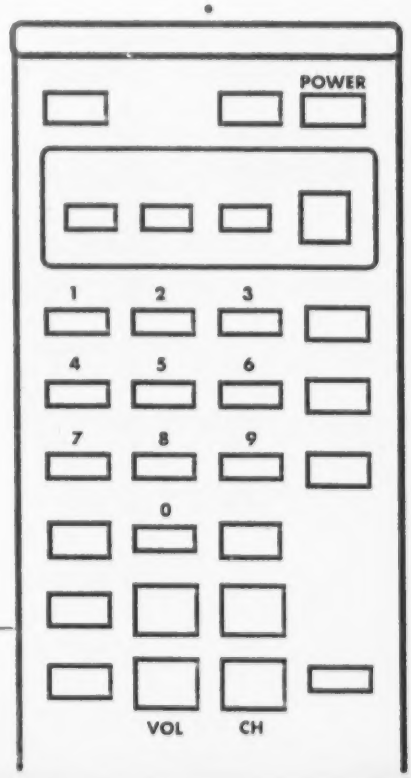
Incorporate anti-violence themes when violence is used.

Understand that the use of violence in animated children's programming is not harmless.

Schedule programs with violent themes in late prime-time.

Avoid playing promos that include violent scenes during times children are likely to be watching TV.

54% of kids have a television set in their bedroom.



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About Children Now

Celebrating our 10th anniversary, Children Now is a nonpartisan, independent voice for America's children. Using innovative research and communications strategies, Children Now promotes pioneering solutions to problems facing America's children.

The Children & the Media Program was established in 1993. Our goal is to improve the quality of media for children and about children's issues.

Media Now serves as a link between academia and the entertainment and advertising communities. It is published three times per year.

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